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Rowland Evans And Robert Novak On the Track Of the SS24

While Congress prepares to cut defense spending and deals with the MX missile, a dangerous development has been obscured by disagreements within the U.S. intelligence community: the Soviet Union has reached the threshold of the first-ever mobile long-range missile system considered invulnerable to attack.

Until last week those disagreements kept the wraps on some aspects of the new mobile system, the SS24. Similarly, key analysts in the Defense Intelligence Agency were kept from sounding the alarm over the number of warheads on the giant SS18 by CIA counterparts who count a smaller number.

The gag was partially lifted March 18. President Reagan's friend, Sen. Paul Laxalt, that day joined Sen. James McClure, a key member of the defense Appropriations subcommittee, in writing the president that a Soviet equivalent of a "highly survivable" U.S. system abandoned here because of political difficulties could become operational "as early as this year." Reagan sent the letter to the Pentagon the same day. That evening, a White House aide telephoned Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger: the president agreed with Laxalt and McClure that the facts should be made public to help Congress decide the right way on the MX.

Moving a bureaucracy locked in disagreement is not easy. The facts sent Laxalt and McClure the next day—in time for use in the Senate MX debate—were spare. But they were given an artist's depiction of the 10-warhead SS24 mounted on a railroad car and a large-scale map of the vast Soviet rail system with its thousands of hiding places in tunnels.

This rendition of the present state of a Soviet mobile ICBM system comes remarkably close to the "racetrack" deployment system President Carter vainly tried to sell Congress. When he took office, Reagan ditched it because politicians—including, ironically, Paul Laxalt—did not like it. The upshot is chilling. While two presidents could not sell any survivable basing mode to Congress and the long-term future of the MX itself remains dubious, a potentially invulnerable mobile system appears certain to be deployed in the Soviet Union by 1986.

The Laxalt-McClure letter prodded out of the administration one significant relaxation of the U.S. gag on Soviet missile development, raising this question: How many warheads do the Soviets have on their SS18s? The answer, under dispute between the DIA and CIA, could prove more important than the onrushing Soviet mobile ICBM. Each additional warhead targeted against long-range U.S. missiles increases American vulnerability by reducing the chance for survival of the U.S. nuclear deterrent in the event of a Soviet first strike.

DIA experts are convinced that the Soviet Union has tested its giant SS18 with 14 warheads. But the United States has always given the SS18 a "book value" of only 10 warheads. The difference for the total force of 308 SS18s is 1,232 warheads—far more than the total contemplated force of MX warheads.

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